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978-1-107-08804-7 - The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living

T. A. Perry

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The Book of *Ecclesiastes* (*Qohelet*) and the Path to Joyous Living

This is the first full-length study of Ecclesiastes using methods of philosophical exegesis, specifically those of the modern French philosophers Levinas and Blanchot. T. A. Perry opens up new horizons in the philosophical understanding of the Hebrew Bible, offering a series of meditations on its general spiritual outlook. Perry breaks down Ecclesiastes's motto "all is vanity" and returns "vanity" to its original concrete meaning of "breath," the breath *of life*. This central and forgotten teaching of Ecclesiastes leads to new areas of breath research related both to environmentalism and breath control.

T. A. Perry is Professor of Comparative Literature (Emeritus) at the University of Connecticut. He has previously taught at Williams College, Smith College, Loyola University, Hebrew University, Boston College, and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He is the author of numerous books, including *Wisdom Literature and the Structure of Proverbs*, *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, *The Moral Proverbs of Santob de Carrion: Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain*, *Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible: God's Twilight Zone*, and *Jonah's Arguments with God: The Honeymoon Is Over*.

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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107088047

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First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Perry, T. Anthony (Theodore Anthony)

The book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the path to joyous living / T. A. Perry.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-107-08804-7 (hardback)

1. Bible. Ecclesiastes – Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS1475.52.P47 2015

2232'.806–dc23 2014047369

ISBN 978-1-107-08804-7 Hardback

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To my beloved grandchildren, Esther, Eli, Isaac, Isaiah, Jonah,

Maya, Miriam, and Sacha

“Grandchildren are the crown of the aged.”

Proverbs 17:6

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Preface

The dominant and defining theme of Qohelet is *hebel*, ritually and almost exclusively translated as “vanity.” It is emphatically announced at the very start as Qohelet’s motto:

VANITY OF VANITIES, VANITY OF VANITIES, IT IS ALL VANITY (*hebel*).

Thereupon it spreads its pessimism through the entire book, occurring thirty-seven times as a refrain, typically in the formula “this too is *hebel*.”

“Vanity” is only an interpretation, however, since the *peshat* or literal meaning of *hebel* is “breath,” yielding different and more complex valences:¹

A BREATH OF BREATHS, A BREATH OF BREATHS, IT IS ALL BREATH.

In my title I retain the traditional motto dear to generations as the book’s calling card, but I attach and advertise Qohelet’s root meaning in order to stress crucial differences between the *peshat* and its many possible interpretations.

Further, given the synonymy of *hebel* with “wind” in the Qohelet text, an expanded literal rendering of the opening motto would be:

BREATH OF WINDS, WIND OF BREATHS: IT IS ALL WIND-BREATH.

¹ R. B. Y. Scott’s Anchor Bible translation clings to the *peshat* or simple meaning in much the same way: “Breath of a breath! (says Qoheleth). The slightest breath! All is a breath” *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB 18 (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 209. Similarly, Iain Provan suggests (but not in his translation), “The merest of breath, everything is a breath.” *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*. Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 52. “The goal of these tiresome repetitions is not pessimism but lucidity, the concrete rather than the abstract. . . . And we must keep to the original word, the literal sense, the breath which dissolves into nothing in the air and which is an eternal point of departure because it is concrete, whereas ‘vanity of vanity’ to which habit has attached us is an abstract point of arrival.” Henri Meschonnic, *Les Cinq rouleaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 132.

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This neologism wind-breath further challenges the vanity interpretation, stressing Qohelet's argument of a *continuity* between outer and inner, macrocosm and microcosm, as against the widespread view of a disjunction between the two and the implied "absurdity" of the human condition. It is a welcome surprise, therefore, to encounter the German translation (the *EinheitsÜbersetzung*) of *hebel* as *Windhauch*, wind-breath. Such a perspective renews the discussion of the resistant pessimism of popular readings, enabling Qohelet's spiritual message to resurface: to joy!

The light is sweet,
And the eyes enjoy the sunlight...
Even if a person lives many years,
That person should take joy in every single one.

Qohelet 11:7–8

Do this before all else, my Lucilius: learn joy.

Seneca²

Many endeavored in vain joyfully to speak profoundest joy;
Here at last, in the tragic, I see it expressed.

Hölderlin³

The poet Goethe once characterized as self-defeating the use of dissection to understand the phenomenon of life:

You have all the parts in hand.
You missed just one thing: the living band!⁴

Such is the situation of one of humankind's greatest moral teachers: all the words and parts of Qohelet's book (Ecclesiastes) have been scrutinized to exhaustion, but the life message has vanished. We now know well enough (well, almost) what the words mean; but even the work's literary genre is still a mystery, and understanding of its spirituality – of its project to live *livingly*, *joyously*⁵ – remains mired in that despair that

² Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 3 vols. (trans. Richard M. Gummere: Loeb Classical Library, 1971), Letter 23 (I:161). All quotations from Seneca are from this translation unless noted otherwise.

³ "Viele versuchten umsonst, das freudigste freudig zu sagen, / Hier spricht endlich es mir, hier in der Trauer sich aus." Hölderlin, "Sophokles," trans. Michael Hamburger. In Hölderlin, *Poems* (New York: Pantheon, 1942), "Sophocles," 103.

⁴ "... hat er die Teile in seiner Hand, / Fehlt leider nur das geistige Band." *Faust*, Part 1, vv. 1938–39.

⁵ Similarly, the goal of love, in the words of a great teacher (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy), is to "love *lovingly*." For why do we spend our lives wishing to be alive after we are dead, while tolerating being dead even while we are alive?

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we have so desperately foisted upon Qohelet. The goal of this essay is to find a way to put the pieces of the puzzle together again, to get back to a wisdom that brings relief from what Emerson called our lives of exaggeration, to recover Qohelet's sense of balance and tranquility and joyous living.

Qohelet summarized his entire message in a single sentence:

I know that a person's only good is to be joyous and to enjoy his/her life.

Qoh 3:12

How curious, then, that this potentially strong appeal to modern sensitivities continues to be countered by a few catchwords wrenched out of context and poorly understood! Here are a few, along with the typical, tired reactions:

"Vanity of vanities" (1:2) – *Oy vey! What a world!*

"What profit from one's toil?" (1:3) – *I'm calling in sick tomorrow!*

"There is a time for this and a time for that" (3:2–8) – *God has us in a straitjacket!*

"Fear God and keep the Commandments" (12:13) – *Go to Sunday school and behave yourself!*

Our understanding of the Book in fact abounds in paradox. Despite Qohelet's popularity, did you ever hear it quoted at a wedding? Too gloomy! At a funeral? Not gloomy enough! At a religious service? Look out: it's awfully secular! At a secular gathering? Too religious! There is no book of the Hebrew Bible that has aroused such deep suspicion from religious establishments. Is he not, after all, "upper class" and "too interested in money"? Unsystematic? Anti-activist? Anti-God? Perhaps – even worse – not even canonical! And what of his theology? No covenant! No cult or prayers or revelation! No religion, really – "purely secular man," ventures one prominent critic.⁶ Not that these matters divert anyone from reading Qohelet, our most philosophical book in Hebrew Scripture. At least, all sides of the atheistic divide may concur that God has more serious things to worry about than His mere existence!

In other words, Qohelet's is a good theology for modern people, for when religion itself has been put in a straitjacket or, worse, become a mere commodity, Qohelet's discrete about-face seems a fine way to save spirituality itself. Qohelet surely does have a theology and existential commitment (otherwise, what is it doing in the Bible?), but it sidesteps those radical intensities ("down on your knees!") and absolutist

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas was pleased to quote Rosenzweig's remark that "God did not create religion, he created the world."

pronouncements that we have come to identify as the total content of the religious life. Qohelet a “preacher”?! Surely not in the sense of those featured on American television, which look more like circuses and Hollywood extravaganzas.

To be sure, Qohelet has little to offer those who derive enjoyment from getting – co(he)llecting! – and spending and overworking. Until, that is, either the money runs out or they find themselves out of a job; or, at the other extreme, they just never do, despite objective needs and reasonable standards, seem to have enough. But for those who aspire to be rid of the great addictions of the day – workaholism, violence, affluenza, gambling, consumerism (including religion) especially – Qohelet offers moral support and a sensible guide. As for those recurrent idolatries – senseless quest for permanence and power and absolute knowledge and heaven on earth – his calm and concrete sense of contentment recalls a perennial alternative.

My focus on Qohelet’s spirituality can thus be taken as a reaction to the thesis, nurtured by generations of both academic and even clerical scholarship, that it does not have one. Except for a face-saving conclusion (“fear God and keep the commandments”) and a few so-called pious glosses, which, according to this view, have kept it in the canon, scholars have focused, sometimes with shuddering delight, on its pessimism.⁷ This strikes me as having too easy a time of it – not that Qohelet disallows yelling out when the pain is intense. However, as Euripides put it, “The easiest thing is to accuse the gods.”⁸ For what remains unnoticed is both Qohelet’s own rejection of such complaints and his insistence (11:8) that humans, with all our woes, must take enjoyment in every single day. And responsibility, too, when we do not.

I offer these exegetical reflections as a contribution to the sea change that is taking place in Qohelet criticism, passing from a mood of brooding pessimism against life and God that in some circles has become so ingrained as to have taken on the semblance of pieties.⁹ At the center

⁷ Or, on a somewhat more positive tone, its epicureanism – hardly a canonical criterion, even though, as Montaigne loved to observe, the master Epicurus was anything but easygoing.

⁸ “Le plus facile c’est d’accuser les dieux.” Quoted in Charles Mopsik, *La Sagesse de ben Sira* (Paris: Verdier, 2003), 157.

⁹ In this context, how refreshing Jim Limburg’s book, inspired by Luther; Marie Maussion’s careful dissertation; Thomas Krüger’s balanced and inspiring commentary; Rami Shapiro’s quietist approach, to name only a few. Jewish exegesis is often more upbeat. As an early and virtually unstudied example, I like Gershon Lange’s *Sefer Kohelet: übersetz und erklärt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1910); translated and annotated by Yosef B. Fagin

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of my endeavor is a rethinking of his central notion of *hebel* (“vanity”), without the privileged help of clergy or even Albert Camus. While not so systematic as some might wish, Qohelet has clear notions of the *human* sources of misery and happiness, and he offers concrete and extensive techniques for passing from one to the other. Of particular interest is his dense meditation on the polysemy of *hebel*, its many levels of meaning, occasioning a spiritual transformation that leads through withdrawal to concrete engagement with the world: if not with the world we would like, at least with the only one available to us, as our human and spiritual birthright.

One fruitful approach would be to meditate on the paradox – in a book that multiplies this mode of perception – at the book’s very center: if Qohelet is mainly about universal “vanity,” then it should be read on days of abstinence and withdrawal from things earthly. At least in traditional Jewish observance, however, the book is read when all of that is over and done with and “the time of our joy” has arrived. Doesn’t this seem to suggest that “vanity,” properly understood, can sponsor spiritual celebration? At the very least, we would do well to downshift from high despair to a sober acknowledgment that allows life to go on *without* all the stress. For, after considering the proposition that our lives are utterly vain and absurd and meaningless, we still wouldn’t mind knowing what’s for supper.

King Qohelet addresses us from the royal perspective of someone who “has it all” and makes all the mistakes common to that kind of person. Why and how does this speak to simpler folk like most of us would like to be? Because we too “want it ALL.” But his repetitive conclusion that “ALL is vanity” may not imply that *everything* is, at least not to the same degree. What then is this ALL that we all want and why is it important, according to Qohelet, that we NOT get it? Perhaps it was important to experience the emptiness of it all, not only to then be able to turn from its pursuit but also to discover, beneath the rubble, the seeds of rebirth into a better wisdom.

The broad trajectory of Qohelet’s curriculum vitae, on his own testimony, is characteristic of many of us humans. Laboring to pursue and acquire the goods of life, at some point we change direction in order to

(Lakewood, NJ: Gilayon, 2007). Lange concludes that Qohelet’s “optimistic approach is the thread that runs through the entire book and ties the whole work together” (p. xxi). New generic possibilities are also emerging. Daniel Harrington has put forth the idea that Ben Sira is a biblical guide for living wisely. Years ago I proposed that Qohelet be read as intended, as a guide for living well – *bene vivere*, the equivalent of living wisely.

pursue the good life.¹⁰ The similarity of formulas accentuates the reversal of intention, for life's goods are nothing like the good life. At the base is perhaps the wisdom conviction, sometimes taught through tradition or acquired through life experience, that life's goodness is occluded by goods and that the real and elusive goal is, indeed, life itself, a given that is repeatedly given and yet perpetually pursued under different forms because it is never the same, elusive by its own nature, as obvious as the nose on another's face and the breath of cosmic air that circulates through me as I breathe in and out, and the inspiration that enlivens my imagination and instinct with every breath. In a word – Qohelet's favorite – life is a *hebel*, an empty or “vanity” breath, and we are its breathers. And the “almost nothing” that is life's breath, the one unrecognized and despised by the builders, has become the cornerstone of Qohelet's teaching of joyous living.

And, oh, my opening quip about dissection.... All the parts may indeed make a countable sum, but not a living whole. For this to occur in a literary text, it is the connections that count, and these are basically the work of imagination and philosophy. Those authors of greatest assistance in interpreting Qohelet are those who cleave closest to his perennial moral and pedagogical vision, whether deliberately (Montaigne takes the lead here) or accidentally (Seneca).¹¹ When the text is also a sacred one, a smidgen of spiritual imagination would also help. Among moderns, Emerson and Annie Dillard seem to me exciting guides and companions. When, additionally, the goal is to think greater perspectives yet – from “out of the box,” as we currently say, then Rabbinic midrash and, yes, Maurice Blanchot can be trusted to open things up a bit further. However, for understanding this most philosophical of our biblical books and rendering it into modern intellectual parlance, my greatest debt is to Emmanuel Levinas, most notably in the literary meditations as outlined in his recently published

¹⁰ Richard A. Lanham quotes Lewis Mumford's pun “the goods of life rather than the good life” as a form of *antanaclasis*. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12, article “*antanaclasis*.” See Appendix 6, “*Antanaclasis*.”

¹¹ For Montaigne I use the edition of Pierre Villey, *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965) and attach, after the page number, the book and chapter; thus, II:1 refers to book 2, chapter 1. For a complete English translation, Donald Frame's is highly recommended: *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976). There is no better warm-up text for Qohelet than Montaigne's essay “On Vanity” (*Les Essais* III:9). For abundant parallels on both cosmology and moral philosophy, Santob de Carrión's (Spain, fourteenth century) medieval autobiography is hard to beat. See T. A. Perry, *The Moral Proverbs of Santob de Carrión* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

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Carnets de Captivité. It is Levinas's acute moral sensitivity that has furnished an appropriate philosophical vocabulary, innovative exegetical principles, and to my mind stunning parallels to Qohelet's own moral and philosophical quest.¹² My method is thus adventurous in that it combines standard biblical exegesis (with a dash of Midrash) with those modes of thinking most appropriate to rendering Qohelet's ethical spirituality in terms of being both traditional and modern. Jewish sages quipped that if there can be no learning without bread, they were also persuaded that there can be no bread without learning. Applied to our task at hand, if there can be no philosophy without philology, the inverse is equally true, and for Qohelet Levinas may be a reliable guide. Among modern critics there have always been those who have gone beyond the totalizing pessimistic suggestion that *all* is vanity and readily admit another side to Qohelet's teaching, if not altogether joyous, at least balanced. Leading the rising tendency is, again, Michael V. Fox in his second phase, the perennials such as Ogden, Whybray, Lohfink, and more recent studies such as those of Eunhy P. Lee, Alison Lo, and Martin Shuster, who in his astonishing philosophical essay senses that *hebel* "is a philosophical concept that must be unpacked philosophically." His title, "Being as Breath, Vapor as Joy..." approximates my own orientation, with slight changes: "Life as Breath, Breath as Joy."¹³ Shuster goes on to express his common purpose with Douglas B. Miller in his conviction that "Qohelet pondered just what image might best represent *life* as he has experienced and deliberated upon it" (Shuster 2008, 230; italics added). He concludes that "once the translation of *hebel* as 'vanity' is dropped, it becomes difficult to maintain a pessimistic reading" of Qohelet, opting rather, like Johnston, for a "qualified optimism."¹⁴

¹² Although Levinas has been primarily known as a philosopher and Talmudic exegete, his influence is now extending to ever newer fields, such as social action, humor, literature, and linguistics. In the field of biblical exegesis, see Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). For further influence of Levinas on biblical exegesis, see Katz, 172, n. 50. In a recent book Claire Katz examines Levinas's pedagogical importance; see her *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

¹³ Martin Shuster, "Being as Breath, Vapor as Joy: Using Martin Heidegger to Re-read the Book of Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 33 (2008): 219–44 at 230, n. 48. In a private communication, Shuster clarified that his use of vapor was simply consonant with its frequent listing with the true *peshat* (breath) and that he "wouldn't want to draw a firm distinction between vapor and breath."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 241. He is quoting Robert K. Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 14–28.

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible Commentary
Abot	Pirkei Abot [Ethics of the Fathers]
BT	Babylonian Talmud
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Levinas, <i>Carnets de Captivité</i> , vol 1
ch./chs.	chapter/chapters
GKC	Gesenius, Wilhelm, E. Kautzsch, and A. E. Cowley, <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , Oxford, Clarendon, 1906
HALOT	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , Koehler and Baumgartener and Stamm. Brill, 1994ff.
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JPS	The Jewish Publication Society
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
MT	Masoretic Text (the standard Hebrew version)
n./nn.	note/notes
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Texts</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
OTL	Old Testament Library
PS	Levinas, <i>Parole et silence et autres conférences inédites</i>
Qohelet	Both the Book of Ecclesiastes and its chief narrative voice; literally “Collector”
Radak	Rabbi David Kimhi (1160?–1235?). See <i>Torat Hayyim</i>
Rashi	Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak (1040–1105). See <i>Torat Hayyim</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
Tanakh	Hebrew Scriptures (Torah, Neviim, Ketubim)

Cambridge University Press

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Abbreviations

TI	Levinas, <i>Totalité et Infini</i>
v./vv.	verse/verses
vs.	versus

Biblical books are abbreviated according to guidelines published in the *SBL Handbook of Style*. All references to the Bible and to classical texts give chapter followed by verse or appropriate subdivision. I cite Hebrew Scripture according to the chapter and verse of the MT and give the English when different. All biblical and other translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

For the transliteration of Hebrew, because in all cases the goal is less to reproduce the exact spelling of MT than to recall the shape of the Hebrew words, vowels are transliterated as they would sound in an English reading. Consonants are transliterated according to the “General Purpose Style” in the *SBL Handbook of Style*.

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